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NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS AND INSTITUTIONAL RELATIONS SECTION

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THE UNITED NATIONS ROLE IN OUTER SPACE

(Not an official record or press release. This summary is made available to NGO representatives for their information and free dissemination).

On 22 October 1992, **Mr. Nandasiri Jasentuliyana**, Chief, Office for Outer Space Affairs, United Nations Department of Political Affairs, briefed NGO representatives on United Nations activities relating to outer space.

Mr. Jasentuliyana said that the the United Nations had been the focal point for consideration of international space issues since the space age began over 30 years ago. The General Assembly had proclaimed 1992 as International Space Year, with the theme "Mission to Planet Earth", to highlight the importance of understanding the Earth as a single, complex, and interdependent system.

In 1958, the United Nations General Assembly established the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space to help coordinate space activities, as well as to ensure that all countries had access to outer space and to the benefits of space technology. The Committee was comprised of 53 Member States. Its secretariat was the Office for Outer Space Affairs, at United Nations Headquarters.

While the first satellites were used for space research, today's satellites were used routinely in communications, weather forecasting, surveying natural resources, navigation, mapping, and television broadcasting, as well as monitoring arms limitation agreements. Nearly every country used space technology. Satellites were used widely by the United Nations in its efforts to promote peace, security, and development. For example, the United Nations recently used remote sensing satellites in Cambodia to identify refugee resettlement areas.

International cooperation was essential to promote space activities and to minimize their cost. The United Nations promoted international cooperation in space by organizing two major world conferences, in 1968 and 1982. The United Nations created the Space Applications Programme, to provide developing countries with the information and training necessary to develop their own uses of space technology.

Legal framework and remote sensing

In 1966 the General Assembly adopted the Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Explanation and Use of Outer Space, including the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies, (the Outer Space Treaty) which had now been ratified by over 90 countries. The Treaty established two basic

principles of space law: 1) no part of outer space may be claimed for ownership or exclusive use by any country, and 2) no nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction may be placed in outer space.

Numerous other space issues had been negotiated at the United Nations, including using satellites to broadcast television programmes directly to individual receivers in other countries, and using remote sensing satellites to collect information on the natural resources of other countries. With regard to the first, the General Assembly adopted a resolution in 1982 calling for the establishment of international television broadcasting by satellite only with the prior approval of receiving countries.

On the issue of remote sensing, the Committee finally reached a consensus in 1986, after 13 years of negotiations. It adopted principles which allowed countries to collect data globally while providing any country over which data had been collected access to that information at reasonable prices.

Following the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), in June 1992, the Committee agreed that satellite remote sensing was important for environmental monitoring and studying global change. It requested that the Office for Outer Space Affairs examine the results of the Conference and prepare a report on how the Committee could contribute to the implementation of the decisions and recommendations of UNCED.

Nuclear power sources in outer space

Establishing criteria for the safe use of nuclear power sources in outer space had been a priority for the United Nations. The Committee reached consensus on a set of principles, which were then adopted by the General Assembly in resolution 47/68 of 14 December 1992. In addition to criteria for safe use, the principles provide for publication of safety assessments of space-based nuclear power sources, procedures for notification in case of re-entry of radioactive materials, and clean-up assistance and compensation in case of contamination or damage.

The geostationary orbit and space debris

There had also been progress this year on the regulation of the geostationary orbit. Through the International Telecommunications Union World Administrative Conference on the Geostationary Orbit, a framework had recently been established to guarantee positions for developing countries while protecting the existing satellites of developed countries.

The Committee continued to express growing concern over space debris and decided to collect more information on the issue before discussing it formally in the Scientific and Technical Subcommittee.

For a comprehensive survey of international space activities, you may wish to consult Space Activities of the United Nations and International Organizations, (E.92.I.30).